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General election: The guessing game is on again

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MCA politician Datuk Chor Chee Heung's weekend trips to his Kota Setar constituency are usually filled by meetings and tackling local problems.

But for several months now his constituents, especially those from Umno, have been asking the same question each time he's back.

"They keep asking me, 'When?'," says the moustached MP and Parliamentary Secretary to the Transport Ministry. When the general election will be held, that is.

Yes, the guessing game is on again, and more than a year and a half before the next general election needs to be called.

And as Chor has learnt, there's no point insisting he doesn't know; as far as they are concerned he is a ministry man in Kuala Lumpur and closer to the centre of political power than most of them, so he must have some idea when.

They only stop when told that "only PM knows", for they know only too well Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's penchant for keeping election dates close to the chest.

Talk of a snap general election surfaced shortly after the start of 1998, improbable as the prospect of having an election as early as this may seem given that the present mandate is as good as April 2000.

The favourite argument then was the economy: better to get it over.

But the past two months or so, it seems, has seen even more signals of the possibility of early polls.

For one, there are the Prime Minister's high-profile State visits that usually involve speaking before rally-sized Barisan Nasional audiences and smaller closed-door meetings with State Umno leaders.

Apparently, no amount of persuasion can convince some of these people that the visits are for Dr Mahathir to explain the economic situation to the people.

They see the rallies as a form of campaigning and the closed-door meeting his way of gleaning feedback from State leaders. And the fact that he has only two more States to cover - Sarawak and Selangor - only seems to further titillate them.

The constant reminders by key BN leaders for component parties to crank up their election machinery have also added to the interest and there have all those pointed announcements that there would be no increase in taxes or property assessment rates.

Those serious about such hints include politicians and their functionaries.

Sabah, for instance, has had two election dry runs whereas Kelantan has had too many to count.

"We are just waiting for the word 'Go!'," says former Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Salleh Said.

That Sabah politicians believe State polls are round the corner is evident from the line of people wanting to shake the Prime Minister's hand on his arrival at the Kota Kinabalu International Airport recently.

The line stretched from the plane to the VIP lounge and out of the airport. Every BN politician with a sliver of political ambition must have been there and the Prime Minister was only able to get into his car almost at the perimeter gate.

But if Sabah politicians were hoping for a clear hint, they were somewhat disappointed. The Prime Minister played along with the guessing

game, leaving those fishing for hints no wiser than before.

The fact that the Sabah election has to be held before March next year is also a main factor behind speculation of an early general election. Many are predicting that the two will run concurrently.

But Chief Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok is said to favour as late a State election as possible so that the impact of his administration can be more fully felt.

The decision, of course, lies entirely with the Prime Minister but, as pointed out, he would surely consult Dompok before he makes up his mind.

Others insist that national consideration will eventually take precedence.

Thus, should you pass the warung and overhear someone say with great conviction, "... after Sukom and before Apec", chances are the person is making an early prediction.

"I think it's more than coffeeshop talk," says Pas vice-president Mustafa Ali.

The opposition, as those who read Harakah are aware, have been among the most diligent in trying to read the Prime Minister's mind.

A recent issue of Harakah ran with the frontpage headline, "Siap hadapi pilihanraya", before going on to a string of reasons why the party expects an early election.

Says Mustafa: "You never know with Sabah politics, so I don't think the BN will take the risk of having the general election after Sabah polls."

Other major considerations, he says, include the economy, internal problems in the DAP and the political mileage from the Tanjong Pagar issue.

Marking out major calendar events is a popular method for those indulging in the guessing game.

"Soon after the Commonwealth Games, especially if Malaysia wins a few medals," is Kelantan BN information chief Datuk Rozali Isohak's calculated guess.

Otherwise, it will be "anytime next year". November is out because Kuala Lumpur is hosting the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation summit.

The Muslim fasting month begins soon after - from mid-December. Malaysia's electoral history has seen by-elections during Ramadan but not, as yet, a general election.

Is it because politicians are reluctant to say nasty things about each other during the holy month of Ramadan?

"Not really," says Ahmad Shabery Chik, before breaking out in laughter.

"You need a lot of energy in an election and people get tired during puasa. Also, they want to observe the breaking of fast, say special prayers in the evening ... it's just not that suitable," says this former university lecturer who is now a close aide to Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

For the east coast States of Kelantan and Terengganu, November and December would be disastrous for campaigning because of the rains and potential floods. Then, for two months after the end of Ramadan, thousands of Muslims of voting age start leaving for the haj.

Taking all these into account, the general election, if it is not held "after Sukom and before Apec" would only take place from March onwards.

Some argue the earlier the better because of the way the economy may go.

Others say the impact of the economic slowdown is worst felt among the urbanites, that the rural populace is still relatively cushioned because they are less dependent on the formal economy.

This is particularly true in Sabah and Sarawak and to some extent, Kelantan and a few other States. Besides, commodity prices have never been better.

Even so, Pas is spinning political capital out of the economy among the

rural electorate.

For instance, it has been capitalising on Dr Mahathir's suggestion - made at the MIC Congress - that women could help in the recovery by pawning their jewellery abroad and repatriating the money home as a form of foreign exchange.

"They tell people at their ceramah that the Government used to criticise Pas for taking donations from kampung people. Now, they say, the BN is asking women to pawn their gold ornaments for the Government," says Rozali.

The NST's 1 Sen Fun campaign has been similarly distorted.

Says Rozali: "They are saying the Government is so bankrupt it is now forced to ask people for their one-sen coins. Honestly, I don't know whether to laugh or to cry."

Definitely, the win in Arau has given Pas a tremendous boost and its white-sphere-on-green flags have gone up in many Malay-dominant areas especially in Perlis and Kedah.

There is no doubt about it. The opposition is definitely in a ready-to-go mode.

The DAP, for instance, has been on a ceramah trail of sorts with their Solidarity, Sympathy and Support for Guan Eng campaign since April and only recently, its secretary-general Lim Kit Siang confidently predicted a 65 to 70 seat grab this election.

This time around, and thankfully so, groups have refrained from airing the pendulum theory (probably shelved after failing for several elections to swing in the predicted direction) or the odd-year-good-for-opposition/even-year-good-for-BN theory (soundly derailed by the results of 1995 general election).

Incidentally, it might be useful to remember that the last time around, the guessing game began a full 20 months before the election had to be called and more than a year before it was actually called.

And perhaps more important, it took place about six months after the Prime Minister dropped his first hint.

Moreover, there have been only two snap elections in Malaysian electoral history. The first was in 1978, when Tun Hussein Onn, after taking over from Tun Razak Hussein, decided to seek a new mandate about a year before the end of the Government's term.

The second snap election occurred in April 1982 - about a year after Dr Mahathir succeeded Tun Hussein and more than a year before the next one was due. The rest were called well after four years while the 1969 and 1974 polls were actually full-term elections.

But as an aide to a Minister points out: "I don't see what's the hurry."

Besides, he says, pointing around him, "if elections were as near as they say, my boss, his pol sec (political secretary) or even me ... we would not be here (in the office). We would be out, full-time on the ground."

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